

TYPE APPEARED
PAGE 11A.

USA TODAY
4-6 April 1986

INQUIRY

Topic: WRITING SPY NOVELS

Ken Follett, 35, a former reporter with London's Evening News, is a best-selling author of international spy thrillers. His most recent novel is *Lie Down With Lions*, which is currently No. 2 on the best-seller list. On *Wings of Eagles*, his first non-fiction book, will appear as a miniseries on NBC May 17 and 18. He was interviewed for USA TODAY by free-lance journalist **Craig Modderno**.



Ken Follett

The truth of my tales is that they're fantasy

USA TODAY: Your new book, *Lie Down with Lions*, has a CIA agent as its hero. What do you find particularly fascinating about the U.S. intelligence community and how it operates?

FOLLETT: There isn't anything particularly fascinating about it. I think that they've operated, as far as we know, as all intelligence communities always operate; that's to say, they have generally attracted into their ranks a small number of dedicated, intelligent people and a large number of psychopaths and fools. They have done occasional good things, but most of the time they've blundered and bungled, and they have told a lot of lies, especially to the people who employ them — namely, you and me.

USA TODAY: Your CIA agent is very heroic and compassionate. Is he modeled after someone real?

FOLLETT: In real life, there are not many people like Ellis — just like there are not many people like Perry Mason.

USA TODAY: What made you, a Londoner, choose an American as the hero of *Lie Down With Lions*?

FOLLETT: I did that because, in all my stories, there's something large hanging on the outcome of the adventure. In the case of Afghanistan, the only thing that a secret agent or a spy could give them that would count for a lot would be an increase in their arms supply, and really, I think the only people who can do that are the Americans. So the way the plot worked out, there really had to be a major American character.

USA TODAY: Do you ever get feedback from the intelligence community about one of your books?

FOLLETT: I did when I wrote about Israel. After *Triple* was published, my agent got an indirect query from somebody connected with Israeli intelligence asking where I had gotten my information. In fact, I didn't have any secret information at all, I just had the information that had been pub-

lished, and then I elaborated on that. I must have made some good guesses, because apparently they were a little worried that I knew stuff that I wasn't supposed to know. (laughs)

USA TODAY: In the '60s, Ian Fleming's James Bond character made espionage into escapist reading. Nowadays, people are taking authors like yourself and Robert Ludlum more seriously. Why has that changed?

FOLLETT: We've all been through a major disillusioning experience in politics since Fleming was at his height. I suppose it began with the assassination of John F. Kennedy, the way in which we all gradually came to realize the truth about the Vietnam War, and then there was President Nixon's revelation that these people who were running the United States were a bunch of crooks. After all that, it's no longer possible to see international politics in terms of cowboys and Indians, like a Western movie. It's no longer possible to see ourselves as purely good guys and anybody who opposes us as the bad guys. That was always an assumption with James Bond stories, wasn't it?

USA TODAY: On May 17, NBC is going to be airing a miniseries based on *On the Wings of Eagles*. Why didn't you write the script for that?

FOLLETT: Initially, I did not want to. I saw the script that they were going to shoot, and I said I didn't think it was good enough, and I would be happy to rewrite it, but they didn't want that. So they went ahead with the script that does not have my approval. But who knows? It may be all right.

USA TODAY: What mistakes do film makers make in adapting a popular novel, based on a true event?

FOLLETT: In my experience, there has been one major mistake: They are willing to start with a poor script. People who work in movies generally

do not think in words, and they don't seem to be able to judge whether the script is good or bad. And even if they're not very happy with it, they think they can fix it as they go along. And that's not right. However, I am going to write the script for *Lie Down with Lions*, and so we will see whether I'm right.

USA TODAY: Do you think the success of *Rambo* worldwide has given people a concept of the USA as a warmongering nation?

FOLLETT: I don't think *Rambo* has done that; if anything has done that, it's the U.S. financing of the "contras" in Nicaragua, the government in El Salvador. *Rambo* is just a fantasy. If we go and see a Disney cartoon — *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* — the fact that we enjoy it doesn't mean we think real life's like that.

USA TODAY: Do people have the same opinion when they read your and others' espionage books?

FOLLETT: Well, we're much closer to reality than *Rambo* or *Snow White*. But all the spy-story writers are still in the realms of fantasy. The object of the story is to articulate people's fantasies about what they would do and how they would behave if they found themselves in severe physical danger. It's not the object to portray real life as it really is. Of course, the fantasy works better the more realistic the background is, but ultimately the truth about these stories is that they're fantasy. In their essential nature, they are like *Rambo* and *Snow White* and *the Seven Dwarfs*.

* * * * *

EXCERPTED